

HAWAII TOUR – February (never to forget – wet...) 2012
Doug Pratt, guide, with 4 participants: Larry, Lynn, Kristine and Richard



Our 2012 Hawaii journey was an odd mixture of success and failure. We did rather poorly with some bird groups (native forest birds, sandpipers, estrildid finches) but spectacularly well with others such as waterfowl. We were plagued by bad weather, especially toward the end of our journey, on Kauai. Television stations were calling it the wettest week in decades. We endured.

Most of our searches for native forest birds involved standing for hours in a cold drizzle, which showed the dedication of our intrepid group. The weather kept the rarer native birds quiet as well, making them doubly difficult to find. And when they did show up, they appeared briefly, and then flew away, not always giving everyone a look. We had an unprecedented four significant misses among native forest birds, but found one Doug had not expected (Akekee).

Not being able to do anything about the weather, we made the best of it and ended up with a respectable species total of 100, only slightly off Doug's usual pace, and right in the middle of his predicted total of 100 ± 5 . But considering we missed most of the seabirds at Lehua Islet because of our boat cancellation, it's a pretty good list.

We did break one record by turning up the most species of waterfowl ever for one of Doug's tours, 17 ducks and geese total. Shorebirds, by contrast, were disappointing despite near perfect conditions for them at several localities, so while we saw some rarities, we missed a few that are routinely seen on Doug's tours (e. g. Black-bellied Plover, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, etc.). Here is our day-to-day.



Friday 24 Feb: (Pre-tour / Arrival on Oahu / Pouhala Marsh / Tantalus Loop

Today three of our party met Doug for the start of our Oahu pre-trip extension. We began after lunch at Pouhala Marsh near Waipahu, where we had our first encounters with Hawaiian freshwater birds, including Hawaiian Stilt, Hawaiian Coot, and Common Gallinule, and migratory shorebirds and ducks such as Green-winged Teal, Pacific

Golden Plover, Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, Wandering Tattler, and a single Semipalmated Plover. The highlight was a Curlew Sandpiper, a great rarity for Hawaii.

We then visited the Honouliuli unit of Pearl Harbor NWR, where we saw Hawaiian Common Gallinule, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, and two White-faced Ibises, one in beautiful breeding plumage. Nearby we found our first Saffron Finch.

From the Pearl Harbor area, we traveled up to the Tantalus/Roundtop loop above Honolulu to look for Rose-ringed Parakeets and Oahu Amakihi, our first Hawaiian honeycreeper. The amakihi were all around, but maddeningly difficult to get a good look at. We also found our first White-rumped Shama. We ended our first very-satisfied half day with a sunset view of Manoa Valley, Diamond Head, and Waikiki.

Saturday 25 Feb: Kuliouou Valley / Kaelepui Pond / Windward Coast

Today we rose early to watch a flock of Red-masked Parakeets leave their roost at dawn. Unfortunately, they were just silhouettes, so after breakfast we pursued them on their feeding grounds in Aina Haina Valley, finally getting good but distant views through the scope. Next, we hiked into Kuliouou Valley in search of the Oahu Elepaio. Although the morning had been nice, rainy weather caught up with us at the head of the valley, and we struck out on this Oahu endemic. This proved a portent of things to come. At least we had good looks at the skulking Red-billed Leiothrix.

We had a brief weather respite as we visited the southeastern tip of the island, finding Red-tailed Tropicbirds at the Halona Blowhole lookout, and several seabirds including Red-footed Booby, Brown Noddy, and Sooty Tern at Manana Island. We had good photo ops with freshwater birds at Kaelepulu Pond, but as we headed around Kaneohe Bay and up the windward coast, the rains came again. By the time we reached James Campbell NWR, it had become a tropical downpour. We did manage to find Bristle-thighed Curlews on the nearby Kahuku Golf Course despite the wind and rain. A last birding stop of the day at the Kuilima Water Treatment Plant produced a bonanza of ducks including both scaup species, Ring-necked Duck, and a Bufflehead.

We enjoyed dinner at a favorite local restaurant at the end of a blustery day!

Sunday 26 Feb: Kapiolani Park / On to Maui: Kanaha Pond / Humpback Whales

We checked out of our hotel and headed for the Wailana Coffee Shop for breakfast, oh those pancakes with coconut syrup... We stopped for good looks at White (Fairy) Terns in Kapiolani Park and in the trees behind the coffee shop.

We then went to the airport for a late morning flight to Maui. Once there, we visited Kanaha Pond where among the expected stilts, Sanderlings, golden plovers, turnstones, and coots we found one of the best birds of the tour, a Ruff. After picking up our fourth group member at the airport, we checked into our hotel, where among the common finches on the lawn were some Orange-cheeked Waxbills.

Later, we headed for Maalaea Harbor to board our whale-watching boat for our sunset cruise. Out on the water, we had fine looks at Humpback Whales, and observed many of their behaviors. After dinner, we went back to the hotel to rest for an early start tomorrow.

Monday 27 Feb: Kealia Pond NWR / Haleakala / Seacliffs and a Long-time Friend

After an early breakfast, we visited portions of Kealia Pond NWR that were outside the main entrance. We had a close fly-by of a Black Francolin, and good views of several of the more common migratory ducks, including a nice drake Green-winged Teal. When the main gate opened at 9, we went in and birded the interior ponds not visible from the highway. Highlights included a Brant, 2 White-faced Ibis, Least Sandpipers, and, amazingly, a Red-necked Phalarope that was one of only a handful of records for Hawaii. We enjoyed the refuge's recently opened visitor center, and then headed up the slopes of Haleakala through green pasturelands.

As we drove higher in elevation, Skylarks flew up from roadsides, and Ring-necked Pheasants provided some color. We entered Haleakala National Park and went first to the visitor center where we observed examples of the native plants adapted to the alpine conditions of the park. At the summit lookouts, we enjoyed spectacular views of the crater, although clouds prevented our seeing any neighbor islands. Chukars provided some excellent photo ops. On our descent, we stopped at Hosmer Grove where yellow mamane flowers were a magnet for three honeycreepers: liwi, Apapane, and Hawaii Amakihi. After taking time for some exciting photography, we went back down the mountain to visit Angela Kepler, an old friend of Doug's who lives in Huelo, near sea cliffs that are nesting sites for Mitered Parakeets. We were too late for the birds, except for 2 quick fly-bys, but Angela's hospitality, including fresh home-grown bananas, and a spectacular home site, was a great way to end the day.

Tuesday 28 Feb: Waikamoi TNC Preserve /

Today we were privileged to have Nature Conservancy docent Chuck Probst as our guide for a hike into Waikamoi Preserve, adjacent to the national park. We were on a quest for Maui's three endemic birds, Maui Parrotbill, the spectacular crested Akohekohe, and the warbler-like Maui Alauahio. Weather was misty and cold, but the native forest was beautiful in this typical situation. We had good studies of the alauahio, but the other two species did not cooperate. We heard one Akohekohe close by, but could not get a look at it, and the parrotbills, which are known to be in the area, did not even utter a tantalizing chirp. After hours in the cold rain, we had to accept disappointment. The weather remained dicey as we returned to Hosmer Grove and tried some more photography.

We then went back up to the summit of the mountain hoping to find Nene along the way, but were rained out at the top. As we were about to leave the park, the weather cleared a bit and finally we saw two Nene flying in – at least a look! We had a relaxing dinner at lovely Kula Lodge, on the lower slopes of the mountain, where we were joined by Hanna Mounce of the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project. She gave us great insights into the problems facing conservationists in Hawaii.

Wednesday 29 Feb: Iao Valley State Park / The Big Island, Kona / Kaloko-Honokohau National Historic Site

We started our last half-day on Maui with an early visit to scenic Iao Valley State Park in West Maui, and then returned to Kanaha Pond sanctuary to enter the “back ponds” that had been closed on Sunday when we arrived. The Ruff was still present at the main entrance, and we were pleased to flush a Short-eared Owl just as we entered the gated area. But we failed to find any additional shorebirds in the shallow ponds.

Our midday flight to Kona on the Big Island was uneventful, thankfully. We picked up our first new species right at the airport with Yellow-billed Cardinal and Yellow-fronted Canary. After checking into the hotel, we went birding at the Kona Waste Water Treatment plant – isn't one such site mandatory on a birding trip where we had all the usual ducks and shorebirds including our first American Wigeon.

We then walked into Aimakapa Pond at the Kaloko-Honokohau National Historic Site, admiring the Green Sea Turtles in the tide pools. The pond had a good population of migratory ducks, including both American and Eurasian wigeons, and a strange teal that we finally identified as a Garganey, a very good find and a life-bird for several of our group.

Thursday 1 Mar: Dry Forests / Search for Palila

Today we toured dry habitats in the northwestern part of Hawaii island. This area has been strongly affected by several years of drought, and the result clearly showed in our species list. Our goal was to see game birds, waxbills and finches, and the large, finch-like honeycreeper, the Palila. Among the game birds, we found all three francolins, Wild Turkey, Common Peafowl, Kalij Pheasant, and California Quail, but could not turn up a sandgrouse (they have been very elusive recently).

Stops at Doug's old reliable localities failed to turn up Red-cheeked Cordonbleu or Black-rumped Waxbill, which may have been done in by the drought, and even the usually abundant Red Avadavat failed to show. But we did find African Silverbills and Nene.

The search for the Palila was frustrating because the birds were totally silent. We followed several promising calls that turned out to be given by the abundant Hawaii Amakihi. Along the way, however, we got good looks at the pale Mauna Kea plumage type of the Hawaii Elepaio, which were not quite as reticent as the Palila. After several hours of searching in all the “right” places, we had to accept defeat with the Palila. It was Doug's first miss with this species in decades, and a bird we should have had despite the drought and cool weather. Alas...

Friday 2 Mar: Hakalau Forest NWR / the Beacon Call...

Today we joined an expedition with Hawaii Forest & Trail (HFT) to Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge on the windward slope of Mauna Kea. HF&T founder Rob Pacheco, and old friend of Doug's, left the office to lead us on this trip and entertained

us the whole way with his reminiscences and insights into local conservation issues and local customs. Hakalau was the first refuge established solely for forest birds in the US. Its spectacular native rainforest harbors all of the Endangered Species of bird found on the Big Island except Palila.

After a long drive on a rough road, we entered the refuge and began a long walk down into the forest. At the first trees, we were greeted by several Hawaii Creepers, often the most difficult of the specialty birds to find, and got good studies of them. We heard several Akepa, but failed to get a look. Iiwi were everywhere, Apapane were common, and the Omao, a native Hawaiian solitaire, could be heard at every hand. With a little work, we got good looks at them and then had similar luck with an orange-yellow subadult male Akepa. Later, some of the group saw adult males and females.

About half way down the road/trail, someone spotted a Hawaiian Hawk (Io) perched in a tall Ohia tree. The light was good and several of our photographers got nice shots. But the bird we most wanted, the combination-billed Akiapolaau ("Aki"), for which we had about a 25% chance according to HF&T, proved to be tough. As we neared the lower extremity of our hike, we ran into Jack Jeffrey, noted wildlife photographer and retired Hakalau biologist, who was Doug's co-author on *A Pocket Guide to Hawaii's Birds*. It was a rare opportunity for some to get a double autograph for their fieldguide.

Just as Jack turned to head back up, he heard the "beacon call" of a juvenile Aki, which usually assures a sighting. But the bird went quiet. Then the leaders all heard a single Aki song. After some minutes, an adult male Aki flew in and jumped from tree to tree for a short while. Doug and Jack saw it well enough to confirm the identification, but could not get anyone in the group on it before it flew away. It was one of the most frustrating moments of our trip, reminiscent of our brush with an invisible Akohekohe on Maui. The cold rain closed in as we hiked back to the vehicle, so we had no second chances at anything. A good day in general, but a bummer for leaders, trying to share the Aki...

Saturday 3 Mar: Big Island Highlights / Hawaii Volcanoes National Park and Lava Glow

Today we drove from Kona to the town of Volcano, adjacent to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. The itinerary started with a drive through the "Kona Strip" with stops at weedy places where we searched in vain for Lavender Waxbills. We finally found them at Bay View Coffee Farms, first perched on the power lines! The coffee mill was not operating, so we spent our time taking bird photos. Then we proceeded down the slope, with a short stop at the Painted Church, and a pause to view the Captain Cook monument in Kealahou Bay, stopping again at the Puuhonua o Honaunau National Historic Site, which preserves an ancient "place of refuge" for *kapu* breakers. We enjoyed the display of native Hawaiian culture as well as Green Sea Turtles in the water, and then had a nice picnic on the grounds.

Heading south, we took a side road to desolate Ka Lae (South Point), the southernmost point in the US. Recent rains had turned the pastures a brilliant green, but made for some difficult parking at the terminus. Offshore, we could just make out some distant

flocks of Black Noddy. Our next stop was at Whittington Beach Park where we searched for a Common Sandpiper reported here earlier in the season, but we had no luck. Then we walked the Punaluu Black Sand Beach, hoping for more sea turtles, but it was too cold for them. Finally we reached our picturesque B&B, where we enjoyed an evening serenade of Apapane. After dinner we made a short excursion to Kilauea Volcano to admire the red glow in the plume of gases.

Sunday 4 Mar: Hawaii Volcanoes National Park / Welcome Sunshine at Kipuka Puauulu

We spent this entire day exploring the national park. No lava flows were accessible, so we concentrated on geology and birding. We began with a walk through Thurston Lava Tube (mainly to get out of the rain!) where we enjoyed the giant tree ferns and other native plants as well as Omao and Apapane. Once the visitor center opened, we spent some indoor time both there and at the Jaggar Museum on the rim of Halemaumau Crater inside the Kilauea Caldera.

We then found some sunny weather just over the break line from the wet to the dry side of the island, and took a pleasant hike through Kipuka Puauulu. The native plant display was spectacular, and we got fleeting glimpses of the skulking Hwa-mei (Melodious Laughing-thrush), as well as better looks at Red-billed Leiothrix. The best bird was a Hawaii Elepaio of the dark color form that gave us great views just as we bumped into a VENT group that had been shadowing us the whole trip. Kalij Pheasants are so tame here that they walk *toward* you, and we got great pictures. Then we had a similar experience with some Erckel's Francolins at the picnic ground.

After lunch at the Volcano Golf Course restaurant, with Nene on the lawn, we headed down the Chain of Craters Road to the coast. The awesome drive crosses several lava flows of varying ages, and we became very familiar with the two lava types whose names come from Hawaiian: aa (sharp and jagged) and pahoehoe (smooth and ropy). Unfortunately, we must have hit the off season for the Black Noddys that usually hang out near Holei Sea Arch.

Monday 5 Mar: Hilo / Landing in Kauai after Record-breaking 28-inch Rains!

Although this was a travel day, we had some time to do some good birding in the Hilo area before our late flight to Kauai. We began with a detour down Stainback Highway to try for better views of Hwa-mei, and scored with two birds that posed in the open and sang. Then, dodging the rain showers as best we could, we checked the two Hilo Ponds. Loko Waka, across from a scenic beach park, had a good complement of ducks, including Eurasian Wigeon and a new one for us, Gadwall. Waiakea Pond had Canada Geese but not much else of interest. The White-faced Ibis that had been hanging around Loko Waka turned up in the big park lawn along the Hilo waterfront.

We drove the scenic route overlooking Onomea Bay, but couldn't see much for the heavy rains. But it was nothing compared to what awaited us on Kauai!

We arrived on Kauai the day after record-breaking 28-inch rains had closed many roads on the North Shore. The parking lot at the hotel was flooded above ankle deep! So we, along with most of the other residents at the hotel, were pretty much stranded and it took the restaurant hours to get everyone fed. Thankfully, the food was worth waiting for!

Tuesday 6 Mar: Kokee State Park / Grand Canyon of the Pacific

Today the weather appeared to be abating, and we actually found some sunshine and some very bright complete-arc rainbows as we drove around the island and up to Kokee State Park. We went first to the overlooks for Kalalau Valley, Doug's candidate for the best view in the Pacific, and found the valley completely socked in with clouds.

Then we employed the services of David Kuhn, a longtime friend and colleague of Doug's, who is the resident expert on Kauai birds, to take us into the Alakai Plateau to search for native birds. Kauai is a sad place for the birder, because places that only a few years ago rang with the songs of native birds are now silent. Over the last 8 years or so, as mosquitoes advanced ever higher into the upper forest reaches, avian malaria has caused a precipitous crash of bird populations in the accessible parts of the fabled Alakai Plateau. David has watched the whole thing. Fortunately, he keeps close tabs on the remaining individuals, and had staked out nests of Kauai Elepaio and Akekee for us. Seeing them still involved hours in a cold rain, but see them we did. We also added two more Kauai endemics, Anianiau and Kauai Amakihi, getting some photos of the latter in a flowering tree recommended by David. On the way down, we stopped at several places where we could view Waimea Canyon, the "Grand Canyon of the Pacific", in dramatic late afternoon light.

Wednesday 7 Mar: Kauai's North Shore / Kilauea Point NWR / Hanalei NWR

Today was our day to tour the swamped North Shore, and fortunately at least some of the closed highways had reopened. We spent the morning visiting two nearby waterfalls, Opaekaa and Wailua, both of which were gushing from the heavy rains. Our next destination was the Kauai Lagoons resort, where a back road takes you to the Ninini Point lighthouse. The road is a good place for small finches, and we picked up a new one, Red Avadavat, but not everyone saw them.

We then went to Huleia NWR in search of Hawaii's most elusive introduced bird, the Greater Necklaced Laughing-thrush, where all we got were glimpses of the skulking birds.

We then headed north, and arrived at Kilauea Point NWR where despite the wind and occasional rain squalls, we managed to see some seabirds up close. Red-footed Boobies were all over the hillside where they nest, and Laysan Albatrosses cruised overhead. It took a while, but we got decent looks at Red-tailed Tropicbirds and Great Frigatebirds, but we were too early for the Wedge-tailed Shearwaters this year, though a few were on nests at this time in 2011.

We then visited nearby Hanalei NWR, where the taro crop provides wetland bird habitat. We had good photo ops with stilts, coots, gallinules, night herons, and Koloa (Hawaiian Duck), but failed to find any migratory waterfowl or new shorebirds.

Thursday 8 Mar: Our Hopes Dashed, Cancelled Cruise Na Pali Coast / Elusive Views and Species

Today was supposed to be our catamaran excursion to the Na Pali Coast and across the channel to Lehua Islet, which would have added at least five species to our trip totals. We left the hotel at 5 AM to make our 6 AM check-in with Holo Holo Charters. After check-in the captain explained that in his opinion, we would probably not be able to get around to the Na Pali Coast, and would surely not be able to cross the channel to Lehua because of rough seas (small craft warnings were up). They gave us the option of canceling for a full refund, and we took it since all the reasons we had for going on the trip were now gone.

So, we decided to spend the day seeking second chances with birds and scenery. We first drove to the Kawaiee Sand Mine State Sanctuary to look for freshwater birds, but found only old familiar species. We had been hearing Japanese Bush-warblers all over Kauai, but could not see them. At Kawaiee, some were only a few feet away yet remained invisible.

Next, we drove back up to the Kalalau Valley overlook, which was clouded in again, but, as Doug predicted, the clouds lifted enough for us to get a decent, if not perfect look into the valley below. Back in the lowlands, we visited Spouting Horn and the area known as Poipu searching again for Red Avadavats but finding none. We returned to Huleia and this time found the laughing-thrushes high in the trees, but equally difficult to get good looks at. At least two more people saw them well enough to count. We returned early to the hotel so that we could clean up for our farewell dinner at a restaurant near the hotel. We counted up our trip total as 99 species – a certain challenge for dawn tomorrow! Overnight, the wind and rain began again.

Friday 9 Mar: Kauai Lagoons / Search for Species 100...

Today our soggy but eventful adventure came to a close. Time was spent getting folks to their homeward flights and doing a little birding. After two folks had left, the rest of us went back to the Kauai Lagoons back road near the airport. There we finally got a brief but good look at a Japanese Bush-warbler, which brought us to the century mark for the tour.

Everyone met their flights OK, despite a major pile-up at the airport because many folks had been temporarily stranded by a bridge closure overnight and were trying to rebook flights. Thus ends our saga of Hawaii in a most atypical year – one of the wettest in history!

